

Tarot and the Eye of Escaflowne

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The Vision of Escaflowne, a 26 episode anime series created by Shoji Kawamori, is a complex struggle between the visible and the invisible, between Will and Fate. Sure, we may all be sick of this overused and cliched theme, but The Vision of Escaflowne takes it to a deeper, more existential level -- do certain events happen by twist of fate or does the past influence future events? Furthermore, how much of the future is determined by past and present actions? These questions cannot be easily answered upon initial inspection.

Although The Vision of Escaflowne doesn't explicitly answer the questions that it poses, it does present a thought continuum using an ancient game: the tarot. Although the origins of modern tarocchi are still widely debated, its esoteric designs were created to answer the questions of past, present and future. The tarot has never been a stranger to the fantastic world of Japanimation: In Jo Jo's Bizarre Adventure, each Stand user's unique power is X, High Priestess represented by a tarot card. Unfortunately, I couldn't establish any resemblance between the characteristic of the card and the power of the cardholder. And in X/1999, a popular manga by CLAMP, each serialized volume is graced with a tarot card in a meaningful sequence based on a certain character of the manga. The idea is not original, but who dares to complain about CLAMP art? In The Vision of Escaflowne, though, the tarot is no longer a plot ornament. Rather, we get a much more intimate picture of the tarot, because the main protagonist, Hitomi, is herself a tarot reader, and her readings have a disturbing influence on the development of the story... or is it that they merely reflect an outcome already determined by past and present events?

The Vision of Escaflowne centers around Hitomi (literally, "eye") Kanzanki, a 15 year old high school student who is transported to a mystic land named Gaea. There she befriends the young king of Fanelia, Van de Fanel, who pilots the beautiful Guymelef (giant robot) Escaflowne. As the story progresses, more fascinating personalities emerge to illuminate an awesome network of relationships. To mention a few, there are Sir Allen Schezar, whom Hitomi has a crush on; Princess Millerna Aston, initially a snob, but who eventually turns out to be graceful and befitting; Folken de Fanel, who depicts a tragic combination of intelligence and idealism; and of course, Dilandau Albatou, Freud's dream patient -- a tormented sadist.

Hitomi is a likable character, smart, reflective and athletic, unlike the usual physically disproportionate bimbos that might be entertaining in bed but not on screen. However, from a pure tarocco perspective, Hitomi's experience is a tarot reader's worst nightmare come true. Explaining that statement would give away the intrigue of the anime, so I'll just leave it at that. But in the remaining space I will attempt to do two things: explain the general concept of the tarot, and present the Celtic, or ten-card spread used by Hitomi in her tarot readings. Please note, though, that this is not a tarot reading tutorial. My goal is merely to introduce a frame of reference for understanding *The Vision of Escaflowne*.

The Tarocchi

The tarot represents our unconscious understanding of experience- past, present, and future. In the past, the tarot was not necessarily used for divination purposes. In fact, some argue that the tarot has deep religious connotations (depending on the deck). However, here I am only going to focus on the modern esoteric tarot. The different archetypal symbols on the 78 cards of tarot are used to represent mankind and all the probable experiences possible to it in life. Depending on the interpreter, or the artist, tarot decks not only varies in number, size, and design; but as the number of cards and the symbols change, its power also changes.

The common tarot deck has 78 cards that are broken down in to three categories: Major Arcana (22), Minor Arcana (40), and Court Cards (16). The word "arcana" means secret or hidden. The Minor Arcana consist of four suits, each of ten cards, numbered from ten to ace, and the Court Cards, also in suits, represent a Page, a Knight, a Queen, and a King. The 22 allegorical Major X, Magician Arcana cards, the strongest cards of the deck, are an attempt to depict the continuous and ever-changing physical and spiritual forces that influence life. The importance of the sequence of the Major Arcana cards lies not only in the history of tarocchi games, but also in the preparation of the deck for modern-day readings, because some believe that these cards are a pictorial procession of life and/or human existence. In *X/1999*, CLAMP uses Card 1: The Magician as the tarot for book one, instead of the initial Card 0: The Fool. The placement of The Fool (the strongest card of the Major Arcana) has been one of the greatest debates of interpreters -- should it be at the beginning or the end? Given that CLAMP actually finishes the 22 volumes, I'm assuming that the last manga would be 0 The Fool, the card of Life and the Choice between Good and Evil; it is also the card that signifies the beginning of a new journey.

In *The Vision of Escaflowne*, Hitomi's tarot deck is designed by Shouji Kawamori (Sunrise) and painted by artist Kimitoshi Yamane. Although her deck is complete, it is written in incorrect Italian. (Italia is believed to be the birthplace of the tarocchi games.) According to the *Escaflowne Compendium*, the *Escaflowne* tarot deck is based on the *Merlin Tarot*. However, this is only partially correct. Merlin the Magician has always been closely associated with Card 16, *The Tower*, but the *Merlin Tarot* is much different from generic tarots. The *Merlin Tarot Deck* is illustrated by Miranda Gray, and instead of the usual four suits of the tarot (sword, wand, coin, and heart,) it uses the more occult animal suits (bird, dragon, fish, and beast.) Other than this similarity in suits, the *Merlin Deck* does not resemble Hitomi's tarot. In my opinion, the art design of Hitomi's tarot is much prettier. More information on the *Merlin Tarot* can be found on the *Escaflowne Compendium* site.

There are 26 episodes in the anime series, and each episode begins with a tarot card. However, you may have noticed that there are only 22 Major Arcana cards. The other four other episodes use the Minor Arcana cards. Click [HERE](#) for a list of the 22 Major Arcana cards of the *Escaflowne Tarot*, written in correct Italian with its English meanings, in a generic order used by most Italian tarot sets. I have also added in a key word meaning for each card and the episode that it corresponds to.

Because I am only covering the Major Arcana, the episode list is incomplete. If you are interested in checking out which *Escaflowne* episode is matched with which card, you should check out Stephanie's *Vision of Escaflowne Page*. It contains a full list of episode titles, plot synopses, the designated tarot cards, and even a link to a description of each card!

Few Examples of Tarot Interps

The Hanged Man, from the Palio di Pistoia Deck

The Hanged Man is usually shown with his hands tied behind his back and hanging from the Tree of Life. But this card is interesting because not only are his hands free, his head has been severed from his body. Upright, this card means duty, voluntary sacrifice (he can free himself, but chooses not to), the triumph of spirit over flesh (mind separated from body), and physical torture. In reverse position, it represents procrastination, escape, suicide, and selfishness.

Temperance, from the Vertigo Tarot, designed by Dave McKean and Rachel Pollack

My favorite deck, the Vertigo Tarot, is based on the SANDMAN comics. Its postmodern abstractions are not only surreal, but they give a whole new interpretation to the modern tarot. Usually Temperance is a winged angel, robed in iridescent colors and pouring the water of life from one cup to another. Here, though, Temperance is seen as Delirium, Morpheus's sibling in SANDMAN. Delirium's power derives from her willingness to become a victim. It's ironic how such fantasies give her strength, because in her weakness she allows herself to ignore all the restraints of Dream, Destiny, and Death. Upright, this card means self-possession, containment. But reversed, it means delirium, losing all awareness of self through extreme action or emotion.

The Hermit, from X/1999

The Hermit, as Satsuki Yatouji of the Dragon of Heavens, holds her lantern to show us the way to attainment. Ruled by Virgo, The Hermit is practical, materialistic, and reliable. It rejects the imperfect and is extremely discriminating. The staff (phallic symbol) is held in her left hand, representing its repression in to the subconscious. She is the embodiment of modern technology, symbolizing its amoral cruelty and strength. When upright in a spread, it means the pursuit of knowledge and a fight against superstition and human limits. Reversed, it means immaturity, rashness, intolerance, and misunderstanding.

The Celtic Spread

In The Vision of Escaflowne, Hitomi uses the standard ten-card spread for her readings with herself, Sir Allen, and Princess Millerna. The ten-card spread, also known as the Celtic spread, dates back several centuries, and is one of the most common methods. There are many other methods of spreading the tarot, like the Gypsy spread, the Tree of Life spread, and the Horoscope spread, but most of them are extremely complicated and time consuming.

Diagram

The ten-card spread may be used either with the entire 78 cards of the tarot, or with just the 22 Major Arcana cards. The seeker (the person with the question) shuffles cards, and the reader lays them out face down on the table according to the diagram provided. The cards are always viewed from the reader's position. The reader turns the first six cards over from left to right and then after these cards are analyzed, the reader turns the last four cards over for a complete reading.

The sequence and significance of cards in the ten-card spread is as follows:

Card 1- Present Position: This card represents the questioner, and shows the area of influence in which the questioner presently exists and the atmosphere in which other currents are working.

Card 2- Immediate Influence: This card crosses the questioner.

Card 3- Goal or Destiny: This card shows the ultimate goal or destiny of the questioner. It crowns the questioner.

Card 4- Distant Past Foundation: This card is behind the questioner.

Card 5- Recent Past Events: This card is beneath the questioner.

Card 6- Future Influence: This card is before the questioner.

Card 7-The Questioner: This card attempts to place the questioner in proper perspective.

Card 8- Environmental Factor: It shows the questioner's influence on other people and his position in life.

Card 9- Inner Emotions: Shows the inner hopes, hidden emotions and secret desires, fears and anxieties of the questioner including those thoughts that will come to the mind of the questioner in the future.

Card 10- Final Result: This shows the culmination and results that will be brought about from all the influences as revealed by the other cards in the divination, provided events and influences continue as indicated. Waite, Ten of Swords

It's important to realize that the tarot can't tell you anything you don't already know. It's natural to fear the unknown, and fortune telling seems like an easy way to control our fears. But the purpose of the tarot is not to predict the future, but to provide food for thought by narrating a story, taking into account all aspects of the seeker's conscious and unconscious environment. If a few card arrangements can lay out Fate,

then why do we need will, courage, and confidence? Chances are, majority of our problems are caused by our own fears and insecurities. In *The Vision of Escaflowne*, though, it was unfair for Varie, Van's mother, to blame Hitomi's lack of confidence as the reason behind all their misfortunes. I don't think confidence and strength are that easy to come by.

Conclusion: A Few Words on Fate (spoiler)

Escaflowne is a great anime series, not only because it presents certain metaphysical questions in an thoughtful narrative, but also because of its subtle irony: that the two victims of Fate -- Van and Hitomi -- end up taking control of their own Fates. Folken fought his Fate till the very last moment of his life, and in contrast, Dilandau was powerless against his. But when Van forsakes the vampiric Guymelef *Escaflowne*, sprouts his forbidden wings, and sweeps a confidently waiting Hitomi off her feet -- not only is that the most beautiful moment in the anime, but it also proves their strength and control of their Fates.

Many people didn't like the ending for *Escaflowne*, claiming that it is too abrupt, too unromantic. But I think it is very fitting for a discourse on seizing Fate. When Hitomi tried to use her tarot cards to control Fate, it only made matters worse, because she wasn't addressing the true culprit of her problems, namely, her insecurities. The ending shows both Van and Hitomi taking responsibility for their past and being confident about their love for each other. Finally, they understand that responsibility, belief, and strength are the real power for controlling one's future. As Hitomi tells her friend back home, she no longer reads tarots, because she has already gained the confidence necessary to master her own future.